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Evaluation of Two Historic Sites in the
Madison to Highway 64 Cleanout Project Area,
Cross and St. Francis Counties, Arkansas.

by

Douglas Prescott

September 1988

Abstract

Examination of sites MA#24 and MA#74 by Archeologists from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Memphis District together with analysis of surface collections obtained from these loci is discussed. These data, together with information previously collected in 1978 by Iroquois Research Institute, suggest that both sites relate to 20th century activities. MA#74 probably represents a tenant occupation, while MA#24 may represent either a tenant occupation or a trash dump. Neither is considered eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

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Introduction

This report details recovery and analysis of data relative to two historic period sites (MA#24 and MA#74) which were first recorded by Iroquois Research Institute in 1978, and described in A Survey Level Report of the Madison to Highway 64 Channel Cleanout Project. Item 2. Cross and St. Francis Counties, Arkansas by Charles H. LeeDecker. The Iroquois document reports results of a literature and background search and an intensive survey and site testing of areas along 19.3 kilometers of the St. Francis River in Cross and St. Francis Counties, Arkansas, undertaken on behalf of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Memphis District (Memphis District). Forty-two sites were reported by Iroquois including two prehistoric sites subsequently determined by the Memphis District, the Arkansas State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Arkansas State Archeologist to be eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

For reasons which are not now altogether clear, artifacts from all historic loci were not systematically collected and analyzed in the Iroquois study. Because of this data gap, State Agencies and the Memphis District were unable to adequately evaluate all historic sites in the project area for National Register eligibility.

Shortly after the submission of the Iroquois survey and testing report, an endangered species of mussel (Proptera capax) was found in project areas of the St. Francis River. While intensive examination of potential project effects on the mussel and its St. Francis habitat were undertaken, all project activities including cultural resources studies were halted by the Memphis District .

In 1988, agreements were reached which enabled construction of 7.1 kilometers of the project. Subsequently, other project-related disciplinary studies, including cultural resource investigations, were reactivated. The data collection and analyses

reported here was undertaken to supply adequate information to allow evaluation of the significance of two historic loci in the reactivated portion of the St. Francis Cleanout Project.

Environmental and Historic Context

Detailed discussions of the environmental and historical characteristics of the immediate project area, including the areas of MA#24 and MA#74, is contained in LeeDecker (1978). Additional environmental and historical information concerning the St. Francis Basin can be found in a variety of sources including Predicting Cultural Resources in the St. Francis River Basin: A Research Design by Dekin et al (1978), which contains a detailed overview and predictive model (albeit flawed) relative to St. Francis Basin cultural resources and their contexts. Morse and Morse (1983) also contains extensive discussions of St. Francis Basin floral, faunal and geomorphic characteristics. The purpose of this brief discussion of environmental and historical variables is to supply a broad context within which to project the types and significance of historical sites which could occur in the project area.

The two sites discussed in this report, as well as all other construction project areas, are located in what is commonly called the St. Francis Floodway (Fig. 1). As the name implies, these areas have historically been subjected to severe seasonal flooding from the St. Francis River. Indeed, although a number of flood control projects have tempered flooding in the area in recent times, damaging high waters still occur from time to time over a large portion of the area.

The project area is situated in the Eastern Lowlands of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley Physiographic Province. The Braided Stream terraces, into which the St. Francis River has carved its channels, is about 4,500 to 6,000 years old (Saucier 1964) although deposition from the river has created much more recent local land surfaces. Local topographic structure is largely determined by the location of point bar

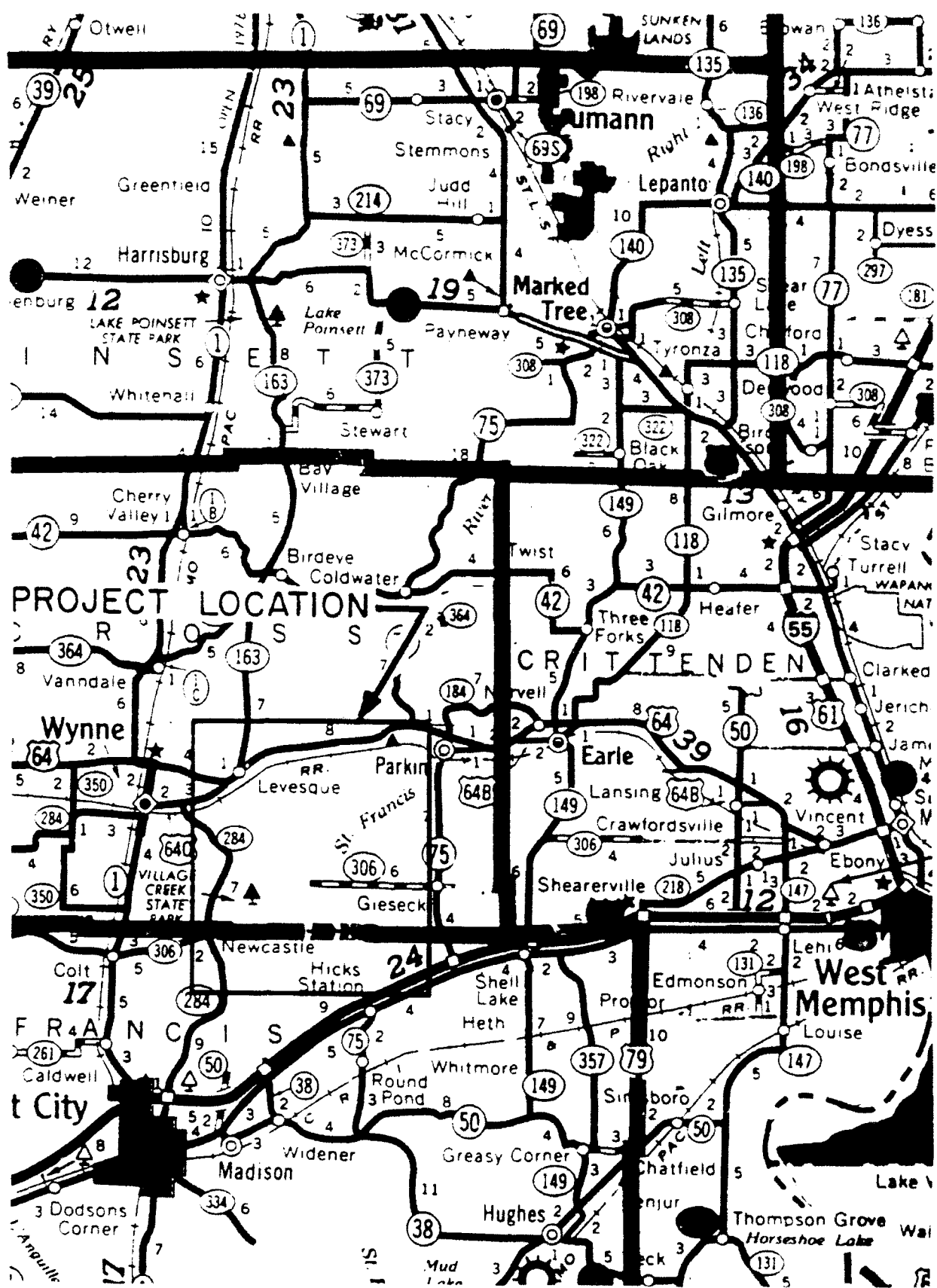


Figure 1. Vicinity Map

formations which form ridges and swales. Crowley's Ridge, an upland area which rises 40 to 75 meters above the adjacent lowlands, is located two to five kilometers west of the Basin in the vicinity of the project area.

Shelford (1963:100) has discussed the extensive floodplain floral and faunal communities of the St. Francis ecosystem. The proximity of the intensive and varied subsistence resources in the lowlands and Crowley's Ridge would have made this area highly desirable to both prehistoric and early historic human populations. Seasonal flooding, however, would have required that permanent occupations in the lowlands be located on remnants of local point bars and ridges.

The project area was visited (but apparently not settled) by 18th century Europeans and Indians. Early settlers preferred to settle on the higher elevations of Crowley's Ridge rather than the St. Francis Flood Plain. Ten families of Cherokee settled along the lower St. Francis by 1796 and this small community had grown to over 1,000 persons by 1805. The community was known as "Cherokee Village" (Hartness 1978:3-6).

The first permanent European settlement occurred in the first quarter of the 19th century and by 1824 a settlement called St. Francis had been established a short distance west of the St. Francis River (Fig. 2). St. Francis was designated the county seat when St. Francis County was created in 1827. The construction of a road called the "Military Road" was begun in 1832 in part to facilitate the transfer of Indians from the eastern U.S. to western reservations (Woolfolk n.d.:2). This road extended from Memphis to Little Rock and passed through the community of St. Francis (Fig. 2).

Although the Civil War had relatively little direct effect on the population patterns of the St. Francis, the establishment of the Memphis to Little Rock railroad in 1869 served to sharply reduce the commercial influence of both the St. Francis River and the Military Highway. From the latter part of the 19th century to the present, the population distribution of the project area has been one of relatively isolated farmsteads scattered along the rich agricultural lands of the St. Francis. From 1895

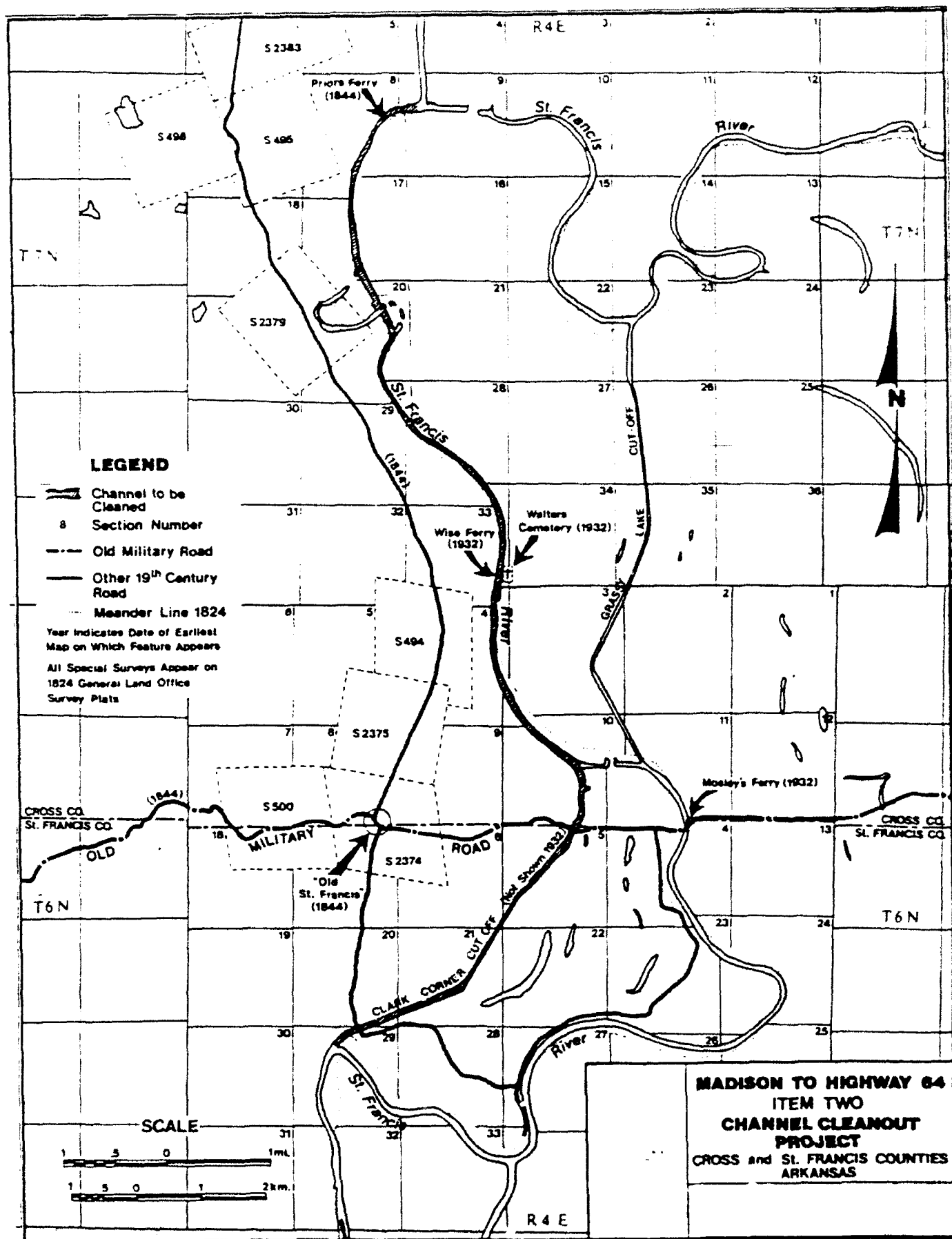


Figure 2. Historical Features of the Project Area

to about 1920, the tenant agricultural system attracted large numbers of sharecroppers and tenants to the St. Francis area. Following World War II however, the tenant system declined, and today most farms are operated with highly mechanized procedures by individuals or corporations with adequate financial assets to funds such operations.

Based on these historical data, 18th century protohistoric Indian occupation cannot be ruled out in the project area. European occupation could have occurred anytime after the last quarter of the 18th century.

Previous Research

MA#24 and MA#74 were recorded by Iroquois Research Institute in 1978 during an intensive cultural resources survey using 30 meter interval transects (LeeDecker 1978). Site boundaries were established by simple visual examination and although a few selected "diagnostic" artifacts were collected, no systematic surface collections were made at historic sites. Shovel tests were excavated at 30 meter intervals across sites to examine subsurface content. The few historic artifacts collected are currently curated by the Arkansas Archeological Survey.

MA#74

Site MA#74 was described by LeeDecker (1978) as covering an area extending 40 meters by 60 meters at an elevation of 57.9 meters. Field forms indicate that observed artifacts included "glass, (an) iron ball, (a) bullet and, white on white ceramics (sic)". Only a bottle base and bullet were collected at the site. The major concentration of materials was reported to be on a low rise in a soybean field. Brick fragments were also reported. LeeDecker noted that quad maps dated 1965 failed to show an existing structure at the site location.

MA#24

MA#24 was described by LeeDecker as being 20 meters by 30 meters in extent and consisting of a "very light scatter" of glass, ceramics and brick. The site was said to be located (in 1978) along a dirt road which ran parallel to and 60 meters east of the St. Francis River. Apparently no artifacts were collected at MA#24. Both sites are owned by the St. Francis District.

Field Methods and Observations

MA#24

Field examination of MA#24 was done on August 10, 1988, by Douglas Prescott and Jimmy McNeil, staff Archeologists for the Memphis District. Site dimensions described by Iroquois proved to be approximately correct although the dirt farm road said to have bisected the site was no longer in existence. The site is situated on a small point bar formation which forms a slight knoll overlooking the floodplain of the river.

Soybeans were at a relatively early stage of growth and the ground surface had been exposed to fairly substantial rainfall since plowing. Site surfaces were therefore considered good for collecting purposes. Prescott and McNeil collected all visible artifacts by examining site surfaces at 3 meter intervals throughout the site area. Collected artifacts are discussed below.

MA#74

Field examination of MA#74 was undertaken on August 23, 1988. Site dimensions reported by Iroquois were found to be essentially correct with artifacts most highly concentrated on a slight ridge. At the time of examination, no crops had been planted;

However, the site area had been disced and apparently plowed as well. Site areas had been rained on and surfaces were adequately conducive to artifact visibility. Transects, 3 meters in width, were collected at intervals of 9 meters yielding about a 33 percent sample of surface artifacts. Other site areas were not collected so that controlled surface collections could be obtained at a later date if desired, without the necessity of replowing soils. Artifacts collected from this locus are discussed below.

MA#74 Analysis

Ceramics

Twenty-eight pieces of ceramics were collected consisting of 17 pieces of whiteware, 1 piece of porcelain, 5 pieces of milkglass and five pieces of stoneware.

All whiteware appears to be the remains of tableware such as cups, saucers and plates. No maker's marks or decorations appear on any of the sherds and none of the whiteware collected is chronologically diagnostic beyond a 19th or 20th century context. The single porcelain fragment in the collection is a portion of the edge of a bowl or plate, but is not temporally discrete.

Five milkglass fragments were collected, three of which appear to be cold cream or similar jar fragments. In general, milkglass postdates 1880 (Munsey 1970) although the fragments collected cannot be further dated.

The stoneware sample consists of 3 pieces with clear/white glaze on both sides, one piece with grey salt glazed surfaces on both sides, and 1 piece with clear/white glaze on the exterior and Albany slip on the interior. The fragments appear to be remains of crockery vessels. Although stoneware has great time depth and continues to be

manufactured today, the use of clear/white interior glaze, at least on jugs, was generally restricted to the 20th century (Munsey 1970:140).

Glass

Twenty-three fragments of glass are present in the collection. Sixteen pieces of glass are clear, 3 pieces are aqua, 3 pieces are brown and 1 piece is cobalt blue.

Nine clear glass fragments are portions of cylindrical bottles, 3 are from rectangular panel bottles and 4 are portions of windows. None of these are chronologically diagnostic although clear glass in surface collections predating 1915 (when the use of selenium and later arsenic as a glass decolorizing agent became widespread) is very unusual (Munsey 1970:55). The 3 pieces of aqua colored glass consist of a telephone wire insulator, a base of a rectangular bottle embossed with the numeral "10", and a fragment of a cylindrical bottle. Aqua glass was most common in the late 19th century before the introduction of manganese to clarify glass (Munsey 1970:152). The telephone wire insulator, on the other hand, is most likely to have been manufactured in the 20th century. The cylindrical bottle fragment and the rectangular bottle base should be most frequently observed in assemblages dating to the last quarter of the 19th century, although a 20th century date is also possible. The cylindrical bottle fragment may, in fact, be a portion of a 20th century soda bottle.

Two of the three pieces of brown glass collected may be portions of bleach bottles. If so, they date to the 20th century. If not, the date of these fragments cannot be determined. The remaining brown glass fragment is from a cylindrical bottle and cannot be dated, although it may be a part of a 20th century beer bottle.

The single piece of cobalt blue glass is a fragment of a bottle or jar rim/lip and is probably a portion of a "Vicks" or Milk of Magnesia bottle. If so, the fragment could date from any time in the 20th century.

Metal

Nine pieces of iron were collected from the site. Eight of the pieces are unidentified fragments and neither their function or their temporal position can be determined. The remaining fragment is a portion of a round wire drawn nail which was almost certainly manufactured in the 20th century.

Other Artifacts

Sixty-five pieces of brick were observed but not collected. Chronological position of these artifacts cannot be determined. Two rubber fragments were collected. One fragment is a complete shoe heel. The function of the remaining rubber item is not readily determinable but may be another shoe fragment. Both were probably made in the 20th century.

Discussion

Sixty-five of the 127 artifacts collected at MA#74 are brick fragments and 17 are undecorated whiteware ceramic sherds. These items cannot be chronologically assigned.

Milkglass fragments postdate 1880 and a number of artifact classes imply a 20th century site occupation. The telephone wire insulator, bleach bottle fragments, interior clear/white glazed stoneware, cobalt blue bottle/jar fragment, round wire drawn nail and rubber fragments all suggest a post 1900 date for MA#74. The relatively large sample of clear glass very strongly implies that the primary occupation of this locus occurred after 1915.

The only substantive indication of possible 19th century occupation is the presence of 2 aqua colored bottle fragments at the site. The possibility that these fragments relate to 20th century activities cannot be rejected since aqua colored glass continued to be manufactured at a reduced level until 1920 (Munsey 1970:152).

The total absence of sun altered purple glass at MA#74 implies that the locus was probably not occupied from the beginning of the last third of the 19th century to World War I when Manganese dioxide, used as a decolorizer, was replaced by Silenium (Toulouse 1971:534).

MA#74 site size (40 meters by 60 meters) suggest use as a single family occupation. The relative lack of high status items in the surface collection points toward use as a tenant habitation locus. If this was the case, the relatively numerous brick fragments at the site were most likely to have been used in building piers or, less likely, a chimney. A tenant occupation is inferentially supported by the fact that from 1895 to 1920 there was a substantial influx of Black tenant families to the St. Francis Basin. By 1930, 73 percent of all cotton acreage was worked by tenants (Venkataramani 1960).

In summary, site and background examination and analysis of surface artifacts of MA#74 suggest the locus was occupied sometime between 1915 and 1965 by a single farmstead or tenant family. The sparsity of building elements (other than brick fragments) observed in the surface collection may mean that, other than building piers and/or a chimney, the structure was removed with some care or even as a unit from the site prior to 1965.

Significance

Sites similar to MA#74 are nearly ubiquitous in Northeast Arkansas - a testimony to the prevalence of the sharecropper or tenant system during the period. Although it is possible that evidence of an isolated subsurface structure such as a well or privy remains at the site, the chances of locating such isolated subsurface features with any archeological examination short of substantial plowzone removal or intensive remote sensing examination is remote.

Given the probable sparsity of the remaining data at this locus and the likely redundancy of such data as may exist, it seems unlikely that additional studies would

field information of importance to local, regional or national history. Consequently, the site is not considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

MA#24 Analysis

Ceramics

Eleven pieces of ceramics were collected at MA#24 (10 pieces of whiteware and 1 piece of milkglass). No makers mark or decoration occurs on any ceramic fragment. Whiteware fragments appear to be the remains of common tableware and none of the pieces collected is temporally discrete.

The single milkglass sherd recovered is a rim sherd from a jar with what appears to be the beginning of molded screwthreads. Milkglass was generally manufactured after 1880 (Munsey 1970) and if the fragment examined does indeed contain molded screwthreads, a 20th century date is probable.

Glass

Sixteen fragments of glass were collected. Fifteen glass pieces appear to be clear, cylindrical bottle fragments. None show labelling or other diagnostic attributes. It is very probable that all of these artifacts were manufactured later than 1915. One small brown glass fragment from a cylindrical bottle was collected but cannot be assigned chronologically.

Other Artifacts

Five small pieces of brick were present in the MA#24 surface sample. The date of manufacture of these fragments cannot be determined. A single piece of concrete was

collected. The fragment seems to be hard and non-friable suggesting a 20th century date. Two pieces of blue plastic were collected. These items were made in the mid to late 20th century. The remaining artifact in the surface collection is a modern 12 gauge shotgun shell which is probably not directly related to the other artifacts collected.

Discussion

The largest class of artifact in the small (n=36) MA#24 collection is clear bottle glass which comprises 75% of datable artifacts. These artifacts almost certainly were manufactured after 1915. All other datable artifacts are referable to the 20th century and the plastic fragments recovered suggest a mid to late 20th century date. It should be noted that Iroquois field notes in one instance mention the presence of purple glass at MA#24, although none was observed in this fieldwork despite complete site surface examination and collection.

Artifacts collected at MA#24 strongly suggest a 20th century use of the locus. It is very possible that the site was in use in relatively recent times. Considering the small site size, the total absence of structural debris (other than 5 small brick fragments), and the low frequency and density of artifacts at the site, it is questionable that a structure occupied this location. It may well be that the presence of cultural material at this locus has resulted from discard behavior (i.e. dumping trash) related to a habitation area in another location.

In summary, examination of MA#24 and collected artifacts suggest that site items were manufactured between 1915 and the mid to late 20th century. All items may postdate World War II. Although this site may represent a tenant or sharecropper occupation, the small area of artifact distribution together with the near total lack of building related artifacts make the status of this site as a habitation location questionable, and items collected could represent a trash dump.

Significance

Surface collections suggest that this site is essentially modern and represents a 20th century trash dump or single family habitation site. The frequency of data apparently available for analysis precludes objective (ex: statistical) analysis of the site. MA#24 consequently is believed to contain data qualitatively and quantitatively inadequate to address questions important in local, regional or national history, and is therefore not considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Conclusions

Analyses of MA#24 and MA#74 indicate that both sites are essentially modern. MA#74 is believed to represent a single family tenant or sharecropper habitation occupied between 1915 and 1965. MA#24 also appears to date to this period although there are strong indications that the site may reflect mid to late 20th century activities. MA#24 may represent a single family occupation or trash disposal location. Neither site is deemed eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

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